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SUBJECT: MELES COMPLAINS OF SHIFTING U.S. POLICY

REF: ADDIS 459

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi called in Ambassador February 25 to discuss Ethiopia's perception that the U.S. has taken a tougher policy shift towards Ethiopia, stressing human rights concerns over shared objectives on regional stability, counterterrorism and development. The meeting reinforced Foreign Minister Seyoum's February 20 demarche to the Ambassador (reftel), protesting Congress's listing of Ethiopia among 20 countries, including Sudan, Zimbabwe and Iran, requiring congressional notification before development and other types of assistance can be disbursed. The Prime Minister said Ethiopia wants predictability in the bilateral relationship and clarity on where Ethiopia stands with the U.S. The Prime Minister went so far as to say that the head of the military, General Samora, and Intelligence Service chief, Getachew Assefa -- two hawkish, yet significantly influential, ruling party members on foreign policy -- lack the confidence that the U.S. shares Ethiopia's security concerns.

¶2. (S/NF) Meles echoed Seyoum's protest of their perception that the "listing" of Ethiopia with countries considered hostile to the U.S. in one short paragraph (section 620) of the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill passed last summer as confirming a U.S. policy shift. Despite the Ambassador's assertions that the Ethiopian Government is misreading signals that do not exist, some members of the powerful executive committee of the ruling party have met on how to respond to the perceived adjustment in U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. Foreign Minister Seyoum called for senior level bilateral meetings to get relations back on track. Such talks would be important for the U.S. side to make clear that talking about human rights and democracy does not detract from, but enhances, our common commitment to regional stability, security, and development. End Summary.

ETHIOPIA CONVINCED OF A U.S. POLICY SHIFT

¶3. (S/NF) Prime Minister Meles called in Ambassador for a private meeting February 25, to press Foreign Minister Seyoum's demarche to Ambassador the previous week, complaining of a perceived U.S. policy shift toward Ethiopia. Citing a short paragraph (section 620) buried in the middle of last summer's Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill that listed 20 countries requiring congressional notification before development and other types of assistance can be

disbursed. Meles, like Seyoum, complained that Libya, Sudan, and Zimbabwe were the only other African countries listed and that Iran and Cuba are also on the list. These countries oppose U.S. policy, and other countries on the list, except for Mexico, are not considered close allies of the U.S. Of all the countries listed, Meles noted, Ethiopia is the only country constantly and consistently referred to by senior U.S. military and civilian officials as a reliable core partner on counterterrorism and supporting regional stability. Ethiopia has consistently volunteered troops for peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, Darfur and now eastern Congo. Information sharing is one of the most robust on the continent and development assistance for Ethiopia from the U.S. is one of the largest in the world. Based on these factors, the Prime Minister expressed a mix of feelings from deep disappointment to confusion over Congress's inclusion of Ethiopia within this list in the Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill.

¶4. (S/NF) The Prime Minister said Ethiopia's inclusion in the section 620 language in this bill was not insignificant, but rather that it sends a clear message that the U.S. is taking a sharper and more pointed approach to Ethiopia that stressed human rights and democratic issues over shared interests on regional stability, security through a common counter terrorism agenda, and cooperation on development. The Prime Minister defended Ethiopia's human rights and democracy record. The approach is different but Ethiopia's position is based on clear legal terms and the rule of law that protects human rights and advances democracy, Meles argued. It may be applied differently from America's approach to democracy, but

ADDIS ABAB 00000578 002 OF 003

Ethiopia's values are based on core democratic principals.

A PREDICTABLE AND SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIP IS KEY

¶5. (S/NF) Meles said the U.S. is extremely important to Ethiopia for security and development. Ethiopia wants a predictable relationship, and a "baseline" of issues and values that does not change and is not questioned. Ethiopia thought the "baseline" was the program of information sharing, cooperation on counterterrorism issues, coordination on regional problems from Somalia to Sudan, and a common commitment to specific development goals and objectives. But if this "baseline" has now changed and the "baseline" includes U.S. doubts and questions about Ethiopia's human rights record and commitment to democracy, then this signals that Ethiopia is no longer a "core country" nor an important ally in Africa and the region for the U.S. Meles argued that America's new policy shift on Ethiopia is based on misinformation and misunderstanding of Ethiopia. Meles became agitated in defending Ethiopia's right to pass a Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO law) which sets limits and restrictions on civil society groups, to protect the people of Ethiopia from undue foreign influence on Ethiopia's political environment. He defended his government's record on democracy and human rights.

¶6. (S/NF) Meles said he and his government are not happy at being labeled and listed among very bad countries. He wants U.S. recognition that Ethiopia is a country committed to democratic values. This is the "baseline," not the questioning of Ethiopia's commitment to democracy and human rights. If there are differences over democratic and human rights issues, that would be acceptable so long as the U.S. accepted Ethiopia as a country dedicated to democratic values. The Ambassador pressed the Prime Minister and others as "misreading" and "misinterpreting" a short paragraph buried in the appropriations bill, and that Congress can, and does, pursue issues and raises views that are different from the Administration. The Prime Minister was convinced that while he understands the separation of powers, the U.S. always has a consistent foreign policy and it is clear to Ethiopia that Ethiopia is now being viewed differently and

more negatively.

DOUBTS OF U.S. COMMITMENT TO SHARED GOALS

¶17. (S/NF) Meles changed the conversation to discuss the U.S. perception of Chief of Defense Staff General Samora and National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) head Getachew Assefa as "quirky" or anti-U.S. Meles underscored that both men support the important U.S. strategic relationship on security because the U.S. is critical to Ethiopia's security. But both men do not have the confidence and, to a degree, the trust of the U.S. commitment to shared goals and objectives on security. Meles reflected on the 2005 incident in which a CJTF-HOA force protection team from Camp Lemonier in Djibouti met with ONLF rebels in the Ogaden, near the Somali border. Meles also complained of a similar incident in 2007 in which a CJTF-HOA J2X team traveled to a "no-go zone" in the Ogaden and met with the ONLF as part of their force protection function. Meles argued that this indicated that the U.S. does not fully trust Ethiopia and may not fully share Ethiopia's views on security. Meles underscored that the ONLF is a threat to Ethiopia's security and so the U.S. should recognize this and accept it. The actions of the J2X raises issues of trust.

COMMENT

¶18. (S/NF) While Meles's comments about Getachew and Gen. Samora are clearly disingenuous, we do believe that this posturing reflects a genuine fear on the part of the GoE that this "shift" will weaken their position domestically and internationally, thus opening the door for their "enemies" to gain more power and/or traction. This is not an unreasonable conclusion on their part given the de facto cover that the USG has provided them over the past few years -- particularly after 2005 -- and what it might mean if that cover was reduced. We should expect that the general irrationality in their behavior will be amplified in their actions in the months to come as a result. We should also look for ways to

ADDIS ABAB 00000578 003 OF 003

use this fear to pressure the GoE to make the changes that we think they need to make to advance stability, democracy, economic growth, and sustainable development. Such an approach, however, will require a delicate balancing act.

¶19. (S/NF) Meles's message was clear. Ethiopia wants the new Administration to recommit to Ethiopia as a core country on security, regional stability, and development issues in Africa. We have explained to Ethiopia's senior government and ruling party leadership that we do share Ethiopia's goals and objectives but we also want a strong and stable government which depends on democratic values and protection of human rights. While the government may wish to ignore these topics, these are the very issues that Ethiopia's people want to discuss. Foreign Minister Seyoum's request for senior level bilateral talks makes sense not only in explaining misperceptions and misunderstandings, but for the U.S. side to make clear that talking about human rights and democracy does not detract from, but enhances, our common commitment to regional stability, security, and development. End Comment.
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